ETHICS OF SOME MODERN NOVELS

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"*Fiction*," says the most sober of Mr. Haggard's characters, "properly understood and *directed to worthy aims, is the noblest and most far-reaching*, as it is also the most difficult of the arts."

"*Dawn*." By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

THE VELLUM-PARCHMENT SHILLING SERIES
OF MISCELLANEOUS LITERATURE.

ETHICS OF
Some Modern Novels

TREVOR CREIGHTON.

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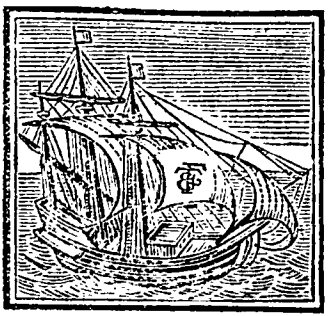

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CONTENTS.

PAGE

INTRODUCTORY 7

ETHICAL INFLUENCE OF WORKS OF FICTION IN THE PRESENT DAY 9

MODE OF TREATING THE MORAL DISEASES OF SOCIETY 11

GENERAL TONE OF MODERN NOVELS 13

HENRY JAMES'S "PORTRAIT OF A LADY" . . . 15

W. D. HOWELLS' "A MODERN INSTANCE" . . 19

HAMILTON AÏDÉ. CHARACTERISTICS OF HIS WRITINGS 25

"A NINE DAYS' WONDER" 17

"PENRUDDOCKE" 29

PAGE

HENRY JAMES'S "PORTRAIT OF A LADY" . . . 33

DIVORCE 37

"POET AND PEER" 39

HAMILTON AÏDÉ'S METHOD OF TREATING MORAL DISEASE 47

OUIDA—CHARACTERISTICS OF HER WRITINGS . . 49

"MOTHS" 51

RHODA BROUGHTON — CHARACTERISTICS OF HER WRITINGS 57

CHANGE THAT HAS TAKEN PLACE IN THE MODE OF LOOKING AT CERTAIN SUBJECTS 59

REMARKS ON THE RECENT PLAYS "HEARTSEASE" AND "IMPULSE" 61

SUMMING UP 63

ETHICS OF SOME MODERN NOVELS.

THE position that novels occupy at the present day, is very different from that which they filled in the public mind forty years ago. At that period in the history of fiction, Mr. G. P. R. James's innocuous fluid was swallowed in three volume measure by young and old of average capacity, with the consciousness, indeed, that they were imbibing very weak tea, but that there lurked no poison in the cup.

All this is changed: the beverage placed to our lips is no longer an infusion of *sloe* leaves, it is too often a dram of fiery quality, a stimulant, containing an insidious poison.

If we recall the names of the best known writers in this line, say, between the years 1835–45—Dickens, Bulwer, Harrison Ainsworth, Mrs. Gore and Mrs. Trollope—and compare them with some of the novelists who have been most read and admired of late years, two things strike us forcibly. One, is the disappearance of the spirit of *romance* (which exists as truly in "David Copperfield" as in "Ivanhoe"); the other, the much more *fleshly* character of most of these narrations, wherein passion is dissected with a startling fidelity which would generally have been

avoided and considered in bad taste when we were children.

The school that was founded by that work of true genius, "Jane Eyre," and which has had so many disciples for good or for evil, has maintained its supremacy now, as regards numbers, over every other class of fiction for more than thirty years.

We are told that eighty per cent. of the books taken out of the great circulating libraries are novels, and that their ethical influence is greater in the present day than that of the pulpit; in fact, that they provide one of the most powerful means by which the standard of morality is affected.

Of these novels, by far the greater proportion

are neither historical, philosophical, political, nor satirical; they are Society novels—that is, novels of modern life, on the surface of some of which are thin layers of artistic or polemical discussion, and further down, in nearly all, is a substratum of passion and intrigue laid bare.

Mr. Ruskin has described some of these novels in trenchant words: "*They are like specimens from Lyme Regis: impressions of skeletons in mud!*".

It seems worth consideration how far the tendency of a literature which makes its way into all our homes, and which can scarcely be negative, may be wholesome or not. The prompt answer of many will be "Decidedly not." We are inclined to think it depends almost

entirely on the manner in which these elements are treated; and that if the mind, like a skilled surgeon, dissects with a view to alleviate human misery, the results may be beneficial even when diseases laid bare by the knife are foul. We do not condemn vivisection wholesale: much needless cruelty has cast a stigma on its name, as many unhealthily conceived books have brought the class of novels to which we refer into discredit.

We propose to examine a few, with a view to illustrating our contention that all books which deal with vice, or which raise questions difficult to answer, are not necessarily hurtful; though some, planned by even the purest writers, appear to us as calculated to be so.

In this estimate, something must of course depend upon the reader. There are minds which have the blessed faculty of extracting good from books which appear to contain only evil.

> "So are we made, such difference in minds,
> Such difference, too, in eyes which see the minds!
> That man you misinterpret and misprise—
> The glory of his nature, I had thought,
> Shot itself out in white light" . . . . . .

The first thing that strikes us as we re-consider the fictions that have interested us most during the last few years, is how many of them turn upon Divorce, and on the questions that surround and impinge upon it. It cannot be doubted that the subject has an attraction for the mind

of the public which it did not possess fifty years since; at which period, it would be difficult to name an important novel of which the main interest turns on the ethics of a sundered marriage. Elopements and marital misconduct were common themes in those days of a clearly defined and accepted right and wrong. Now that the law is relaxed, and that with a growing tendency towards analysis and discussion, the right and the wrong have assumed a more complicated aspect, it is not surprising that many novels play round the subject like summer lightning, while a few cleave with forked flashes the very heart of the question.

One of the most recent fictions we would cite as an instance of this, is Mr. Henry James's

clever but unsatisfactory "Portrait of a Lady." We use the word "unsatisfactory," not only because the end appears to us inartistic, but because, if such a "Portrait" *was* worth painting, the subtle and delicate lines which marked the gradual change from the hallucination of the girl to the indifference of the wife, should surely not have been omitted. The main difficulty of the representation is blinked. It is the portraits of *two* women: the interest which we fancy should have lain in the slow alteration of character is lost.

The possible conclusion to this story which is suggested by Henrietta Stackpole's words at the close of the last chapter, is, morally, very unsatisfactory. "*Look here, Mr. Goodwood.*" "*You,*

just wait." We consider the suggestion of Isabel's future moral lapse quite inconsistent with her fine character, and that it lowers the ethical value of this clever novel. Caspar Goodwood was Isabel's *first* and *persistent* lover, and persecutes her with declarations of his love *after* her marriage with Osmond. Moreover, when he discovers the unhappiness of her married life, and that she has, in opposition to her husband's wish, come to England alone, to take leave of her dying cousin, he entreats her not to return to him, but to defy the world's opinion and accept *his* (Goodwood's) love and *his* home, before even the *question* of divorce had been raised. "*Ah, be mine as I am yours.*" "*It would be an insult to you to assume that you care for the* look *of the*

thing,—for what people will say,—for the bottomless idiocy of the world," &c., &c. He pleads in vain;—the agony of the position, the strength of the temptation, almost overwhelm Isabel, but she withstands all, and bids Goodwood leave her. After a passionate outburst of love, he obeys. "She had not known where to turn; but she knew now." "*There was a very straight path.*" She at once returns to Rome.

From a moralist's point of view, Mr. Goodwood's proposition was unjustifiable. Even if the marriage of a divorced woman could be advocated, there were in this case no grounds for a divorce; though ample ones for a separation. A man's irregularities *before* marriage, if discontinued after the

contract, do not give his wife any claim to a divorce. Osmond had become indifferent to Madame Merle, and his *immoral* relations with her had ceased before his union with Isabel. The discovery of his former *liaison* —of the base deception practised upon her— of the general unworthiness of her husband's character, added to his studied neglect, fully justified Isabel's living apart: her love for him was dead, but she had a strong conviction of the rigour of marriage claims and a noble desire to befriend and comfort poor little Pansy; so she returns to her loveless, unhappy home, carrying with her our deep pity and respect. The author leaves us in ignorance as to her ultimate course, but we are

inclined to believe that she accepts the tragical position, and that Mr. Goodwood will wait in vain.

For the thoughtful reader, the ethical interest of Mr. Howells' striking novel—"A Modern Instance," is great, and the Divorce question is brought prominently before us in the latter part of the story, which tells of the unhappy married life of a young couple, arising from incompatibility of character. The wife's unreasonable jealousy and exacting temper, joined to an impulsive temperament which is utterly uncontrolled, weary the patience of her husband, and work great misery to both. Professor Nicholls, in his work upon American Literature, states that he "would, in either equinox, cross the

Atlantic to escape from some of these American heroines;" and certainly Marcia Gaylord may be ranked among the objectionable ones. Bartley Hubbard was unprincipled, but his evil tendencies were increased tenfold by the impulsive unwisdom of his jealous wife.

As a psychological study, this novel merits attention, and its ethical tone is unquestionably high.

It is evident that Mr. Howells regards with disfavour the present relaxed laws regarding divorce which exist in various States of America, and we infer that the motive of this book is to show its moral undesirability Almost unconsciously at first, and by degrees more definitely, the advantages of a divorce

from Marcia suggest themselves to Bartley Hubbard's mind. At length, exasperated by a violent outbreak of his wife's jealous temper, he abandons her. She remains faithful to him, and lives in hope of his return; but after two years, she receives, through a newspaper advertisement, the intimation that Bartley is in Indiana State, and that he demands a divorce from Marcia, on the ground "*of her abandonment of him and gross neglect of duty*," and she is summoned to appear in Court and defend herself, or submit to the divorce. Although painfully startled by this false accusation, Marcia decides *not* to appear against her husband; therefore, through perjured witnesses, he obtains a divorce.

We have not space for the details of the case; our readers must turn to the book and acquaint themselves with it.

A certain Mr. Halleck, who had fallen in love with Marcia in her girlhood, without the opportunity of declaring his attachment before circumstances divided him from her, meets her again after her marriage, and his old love is rekindled; he struggles against it, and honourably refrains from any intimation to Marcia of his hopeless passion. When, however, she is deserted by her husband, a strong temptation seizes Halleck to induce her to obtain a divorce and marry him. He says to his friend Atherton, "*He has abandoned her, and she has a right to be free.*" "*She can get a divorce.*"

"Oh," said Atherton, "has that poison got into *you*, Halleck? You might ask her, if she were a widow, to marry you; but how will you ask her, if she is still a wife, to get a divorce, and then marry you? How will you suggest *that* to a woman whose constancy to her mistake has made her sacred to you? You would have to corrupt her soul first; . . . . but you don't *look* like one of those scoundrels who lure women from their duty, ruin homes, and destroy society, not in the old libertine fashion, in which the seducer had at least the grace to risk his life, but safely, smoothly, *under the shadow of our infamous laws.* Have you come back here to give your father's honest name, and the example of a man of your own

blameless life, *in support of conditions that tempt people to marry with a mental reservation, and that weaken every marriage bond with the guilty hope of escape whenever a fickle mind, or secret lust, or wicked will, may dictate?*"

Again, Atherton says to his wife—"There are a great many things that are not wrong except as they wrong others. I've no doubt that, as compared with the highest love her husband ever felt for her, Halleck's passion was as light to darkness. But if he could only hope for its return through the perversion of her soul—through teaching her to think of escape from her marriage by a divorce, then it was a crime against her and against society."

Other equally unequivocal passages might

be quoted, but our readers must turn to the book for them, and draw their own conclusions from the arguments *pro* and *con*, carried on between Halleck and his friends.

We close our notice of this thoughtful novel with a short conversation between Mr. Atherton and his wife. The latter remarks "that there seemed to be no great thing she could do for her husband." "I'm very glad of that," he replies. "Let's try to be equal to the little sacrifices we must make for each other. They will be quite enough. *Many a woman who would be ready to die for her husband, makes him wretched because she won't live for him.*"

We will now examine two or three of Mr. Hamilton Aïdé's novels, as they seem to us

typical of the age, in the spirit and temper with which certain subjects are handled. And this more especially so in the last of those we shall examine—"Poet and Peer,"—a book which it is clear could only be a product of the latter part of the nineteenth century.

We shall not dwell upon Mr. Aïdé's merits or shortcomings as a novelist in general; that forms no part of our present purposes. He has one incontestible merit, which is, that he leaves his characters to unfold themselves, and the reader to form his own impressions of their moral or immoral actions.

There are many minds which shrink from a revelation of the vices which underlie the outward proprieties of society. These pictures may

be true to life, they assert, but they ought not to be unveiled. "*No good is ever done to society by the pictorial representation of its diseases.*" If this view of the question were universally accepted, objections might be made to such delineations as Lady Castle in "Penruddocke," or Mrs. Fitzroy in "A Nine Days' Wonder." The latter is the more complicated problem of the two, leaving us a little bewildered as to how much we are to blame, how much to extenuate in the woman who is unquestionably something of an *intrigante*, in spite of the strong sympathy she inspires. And this brings us to speak of a feature in Mr. Aïdé's novels which it would be well to consider, though many of his critics maintain that the subject ought never

to be touched upon. "Anxious morality permits the fact, but forbids the reference." We allude to his compassionate treatment of our fallen sisters.

If our readers turn to the latter part of "A Nine Days' Wonder," they will find that Mr. Vavasour is ready not only to forgive, but to marry Mrs. Fitzroy after her confession of the error in her past life.

We think that in real life this would not have been the case—however there may be a difference of opinion on the matter; but it is evident the author did not consider that Mr. Vavasour's marriage with this brilliant *intrigante* would be either a pleasing or a proper conclusion to the story: therefore, through the medium of her

magnanimity, he avoids it, and by throwing the softening veil of delicacy of feeling over the woman so dearly loved, wins for her both admiration and sympathy.

Those who have had experience of country life, cannot fail to recognise the realism in Miss Tarragon and her crew; the intolerable individuals who

> "Heard all that was, and what was not,
> Enquired, conjectured, and forgot."

"Penruddocke" is a novel of "fashionable life," that is, of life where we naturally look for, and in all probability will find, a veneer of fine manners, with an underlying material which is often coarse and common. This is illustrated

by several characters in "Penruddocke." Mr. Francis, the tutor, however, like a fine-grained wood, sound to the core, exhibits the highest polish of which our human nature is susceptible, —that of regard and charity for all around. He is *par excellence*, the gentleman of the book.

In Lady Castle we have another instance of the author's compassion for an erring woman: he shows that her defective education and her husband's unwisdom had conduced to her immorality. This character is worth study by those who are entangled in the dissipations and temptations of the London world.

We remark the hero's delicate sensibility to honour; his admirably high standard of right

between man and man, while as to man or woman's relation to God, he is either callous, or unsympathetic, where honour does not rule his conduct. How nobly he acts about Beaumanoir! In *this* affair his eyes are open; but he has no loathing of vice, therefore he continues his friendly relations with a Lady Castle.

Osmund Penruddocke's many shortcomings and inconsistencies do not, however, prevent our feeling a strong interest in him. He is an only too faithful representation of complex human nature. We are reminded of "Holy Herbert's" lines-

"Oh, what a thing is man! how farre from power,
From settled peace and rest!
He is some twentie sev'rall men at least,
Each sev'rall houre!"

We watch with interest the gradual improvement in Osmund's character, which is the outcome of his trials, and of the religious feeling roused and strengthened by his friend Francis. Two of this good man's remarks are worthy of quotation. "*You have not sought out the great Light for yourself, putting aside all human instruments, which are like clouds between us and the Sun.*" Again, "*The heart of all true faith is spiritual communion; without it, all creeds are lifeless.*"

These discussions, however, lead to Osmund's

constant intercourse with Madame d'Arnheim, and to his engagement to her before she is released from her worthless husband by divorce. This is, we think, a great moral flaw in the book, and one which weakens its beneficial influence.

At first, Madame d'Arnheim appears very charming, very noble, very good; but as the story develops, and we become more intimate with her, we find much in this lady that is distasteful and disappointing: it is in her relations with Osmund that we especially condemn her. At the outset of his career, her influence over the inexperienced young man was decidedly beneficial; but its character degenerates, and our respect for her lessens, when, at Kendal Castle, she allows herself to

talk to him of being *délaissée.* A woman's confession to others of her unhappiness in married life is always objectionable. The intimate friendship between Madame d'Arnheim and the quixotic Osmund rendered it especially so in their case. The very tragedy of the confession leads a man into danger through his compassion, and indignation at the woman's wrong.

It appears to us an inconsistency in the character of a woman it is evident the author intends us to admire, that when she became conscious of her love for Osmund, she yet chose to be his constant companion, instead of avoiding the danger of his society, and at length, renouncing her original determination

to reject a divorce, actually sues for one, on the plea of her passion for another man. "*The only argument in favour of my not relinquishing my husband was taken from me when I knew that I never could or ought to return to him!*" Strange words these in the mouth of a high-principled woman!

In Mr. James's "Portrait of a Lady," Isabel Archer, under similar circumstances, acts very differently. She, too, has ceased to love her unworthy husband, and she feels that her heart is slipping out towards Caspar Goodwood; but she does not take him into her confidence, nor complain of being *délaissée*. His endeavours to draw from her a confession of her misery are fruitless, and to avoid his society,

she devises a pretext which obliges him to quit Rome.

There cannot be a difference of opinion as to the moral inferiority of Marie d'Arnheim.

By breaking off Osmund's engagement to Marie and sending him back to the love of his boyhood, the author proves, that, though the words of the prominent characters are in favour of it, he himself is unwilling to recognise the marriage with a divorced woman as a fitting one for his hero. We are, however, surprised that he puts these words into Osmund's mouth: "*I can only repeat that our Church permits such marriages, and where two people want to be married, the removal of the restraint is, I think, more moral than its retention.*" To remove the

restraint of laws because our inclinations rebel against them, would, in itself, be an incentive to crime, and the argument is a dangerous one. Of course, there will always be cases in which the restraint falls very heavily and painfully on individuals. There are exceptions to all rules, but it is generally recognised that individual interests must be sacrificed to the welfare of the community.

Though divorce is now established by the State (in 1859), it never was, and is not now, we believe, the law of our Church. This difference was noticed in Parliament, and Clergymen of the Church of England were allowed the option of refusing to solemnize the marriage of a divorced wife or husband,

if they felt it opposed to the law of their conscience.

Lord Wensleydale and other eminent lawyers allowed that the law of our Church is, that marriage remains indissoluble, and as this view is upheld by Mr. Francis—(it is one of the tenets of the Church of Rome)—we are justified in believing that Mr. Aïdé holds the same opinion. Many deep thinkers consider the law of divorce a most unhappy measure for the welfare of the country.

We have not space for further analysis of this novel; we can only remark that Lady Rachel is painfully true to nature; under the icy perfection of a decorous righteousness, such giant crimes may harbour. Osmund's cousin

Elizabeth is, to us, the real heroine; Marie d'Arnheim pales in the light of this fine character.

To a thoughtful reader, the strong interest of this carefully written novel lies in the variety and individuality of the characters. It contains a fund of solid observation and reflection which a second reading develops more clearly.

We now turn to Mr. Aïdé's more recent novel, "Poet and Peer," which, at the time of its publication (1881), excited some attention on the Continent, and has been translated into French for *La Révue des Deux Mondes.*

This decidedly clever novel possesses a greater psychological interest than any of the author's earlier works, though to a certain

degree it lacks originality; many other novels having treated satirically the exaggerated æstheticism and morbid art of the day: but in "Poet and Peer" Mr. Aïdé goes further; he touches upon some of the great religious and social problems.

The introduction of these questions entails upon the writer a task of no mean difficulty, because he has to bear in mind that his book must be readable as a work of fiction, and the interest maintained as such.

We presume it is for this reason that Mr. Aïdé runs at express speed along the most dangerous and unsettling lines of modern thought.

The hero of the tale, Wilfrid Athelstone,

may be considered a representative of the English Socialist, and possesses the robust self-confidence natural to would-be reformers.

The faults and dangers of such a character are admirably and truthfully depicted; the disturbing leaven of his unsettled opinions is given so forcibly, that as we read, we fear they will remain in the mind which finds them a novelty, and germinate. It has been said, that "nothing is stranger in the nature of man than the contrarieties of all kinds which are found in it." In Wilfrid Athelstone, Mr. Aïdé has given us an example of this complex nature. Weak, undisciplined, selfish, impulsive, he yet has high aspirations; which, however, work no good result, because they are

thwarted by the misguided people to whose influence his easily led mind is subordinated.

If it was the author's intention to delineate the utter moral failure which a man's life becomes when he is ruled by the policy of the world, casting aside all religious belief for the worship of humanity,—if, we repeat, this was his intention, it is admirably and consistently carried out. We admit, however, that we share some of Wilfrid's views as to external religion. We think it, in the present day, conventional, and largely adulterated with the commonest worldly dross, and we assent to Mr. Lawrence Oliphant's description of England as "the Pharisee of nations." It appears to us that the tendency of the

English Church is to keep souls incapable of the strong meat St. Paul regretted his converts could not take;—it diets them upon spoon-meat, or milk which eighteen centuries have not preserved as sweet and pure as it was in St. Paul's time.

Strong thoughtful people, be they men or women, cannot be held by the old gyves of ecclesiastical usage.

"The time is coming when we must be Christians indeed, if we are to be at all; for conventional Christianity is beginning to pass away."

The insertion of some questionable modern views on the marriage bonds, as the main outcome of the odious Madame de Waldeck's

teaching, is perfectly consistent, and necessary not only to complete Wilfred's representative character, but as the machinery for the tragical *dénouement* of the story.

The evil results, were Lord Athelstone's ideas carried out, are not hinted at. This appears to us one of the moral failures of the book. There was a quite legitimate opportunity for a statement by his friend St. John of the dangers and difficulties of a relaxation of the laws of divorce to the extent advocated by Athelstone, but the author only allows him to offer a feeble illustration of the advantages of the existing obstacles to obtaining a divorce, in the ultimate reconciliation and conjugal happiness of an old couple.

We admit that the re-arrangement of the marriage laws is a thorny subject for any serious thinker. The marriage question will always be a complicated one, and the risks tremendous, while society is in its present corrupt condition.

Sylvia Brabazon is a beautiful creation. We conclude she was intended to have had spiritual depth and height enough to lift Wilfred over all the shifting shoals of mere negations, but we do not believe that any woman would have permanently swayed such a character; her relations with Wilfred are cleverly defined, and the closing scene of this tragical story is treated with great delicacy and tact. The reader is left to form his own surmises as to the future

of Wilfred and Sylvia. Our impression is that they will not marry.

Nellie's character and relations with Wilfred are well drawn. A more injurious and fatiguing influence for her idol could not be conceived.

Hardly one man in a thousand, be he ever so noble, can endure worthily the whole weight of a woman's love. Once sure that it is his, he feels the pressure rob him of liberty and tacitly claim more than he can return. How delicately Nellie's drawbacks are admitted, without any of the usual vulgar indications of difference of grade. In her diligent practising, one feels the refined, gentle creature's inevitable miss of the *savoir-faire* that, among people cultivated from birth, steals into the most stupid.

It is this delicacy of treatment which makes "Poet and Peer" far more useful than the generality of novels describing the ill-effects of a *mésalliance.*

Lady Athelstone's character is true to the life: a clever portrayal of the kind of woman who most surely drives a son to the extremes of thought freedom.

The Bishop of Oporto is a perfect incarnation of the Church jubilant and respectable.

Many refined thoughts are expressed in this striking novel: we must however remark the prominence given to all that is unsettling in matters of faith, while the attempt to encourage and strengthen the wavering mind is too feeble. The poison is administered, the antidote with-

held, or, if offered, is impotent to take effect. Many passages are suggestive only, but on this account all the more fascinating to the young and inexperienced, who are ever eager to taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Doubts and questionings are excited about matters which had been accepted with child-like faith, and "the things which they have seen, they now can see no more."

The examination of these novels brings out three points in Mr. Aïdé's method of treating the moral diseases of society, which are worthy of attention, and give a distinctive, and we think a beneficial tone to his books :—

1. He does not make vice attractive by *surrounding it with sentiment.*

2. *He shows that he has no sympathy with it.*

3. *The line is clearly marked between good and evil.*

In Mr. Aïdé's recent novel "Introduced to Society" (published a few weeks since), the ethical characteristics to which, in his earlier books we have attracted attention, are very prominent. The tone of this society sketch,—for it is little more than a sketch—is pure and refined, and it cannot be read by any thoughtful person without moral benefit.

We will now turn to a class of novels in which an entirely different method of dealing with vice is adopted.

First we take "Moths," by Ouida.

As we enter a French cathedral through

one of its *flamboyant* doorways, we are filled with wonder at the number and variety of the figures, canopies, and foliage which cover the recesses of its arch; our eyes are dazed by the ornate luxuriance concentrated in so small a space. Just so, as we read the first thirty lines of the opening chapter of this novel, we are filled with wonder at the number and variety of the sins with which Lady Dolly is accredited. Our *minds* are dazed by the luxuriant viciousness detailed in so few lines. Ouida's style is *flamboyant*. All the vices and immoralities of society are presented to us in richly-carved draperies and under crocketted canopies. But let us abandon metaphor, and use plain language. If our words are strong,

Ouida must pardon us. Indignation is hot within us when we remember that it is a woman, and a very clever woman, who prostitutes her brilliant talent, and thrusts before the mothers and *daughters* of England this glaring picture of unashamed vice and indecency. All the loathsome diseases of society are laid bare, and minutely discussed by her able pen: she appears unconscious of the impurity of the air which is breathed by her readers, or, if not unconscious, she is indifferent —nay, she seems to take a cynical delight in the viciousness which is the normal condition of the world into which she takes us. Few readers of Ouida's society novels can long remain unconscious of this unpleasant characteristic.

Here, again, we find the question of divorce placed before us, and in its most repulsive form. In "Friendship" and in "A Winter City," the subject is glanced at; it is the main outcome of this novel. We conclude that this book is intended to act as a mirror to vice. Lady Dolly's words to her young daughter will give some idea of its ethical tendencies:—

"*Know how to dress, how to curtsey, how to look your best; that is all you want to know. Believe me, men will ask nothing more of you.*" Again, "*Only you must be masculine and slangy; . . . . but I am dreadfully afraid you will be just the old-fashioned, prudish, open-air-touch-me-not Englishwoman. Now you*

know that won't answer anywhere nowadays." As we read this motherly advice, the thought flashes into our minds—if English daughters were to follow it, the race of "ministering angels" would become extinct.

The girl heroine is the one pure character in the book. She represents innocence victimised by the world. Vera falls in love with the fashionable opera-singer Corrèze, and her love is returned; but she is forced by a vicious mother to marry a profligate Russian prince of enormous wealth and high position. This man is a modern Nero. With a lamp in her hand, Ouida takes her readers into the dark chambers of his life.

The young victim of this loveless marriage

changes into a magnificently dressed automaton it is only when Corrèze comes upon the scene, that she gives signs of life. He is evidently intended to shine like a white light in the moral darkness, but while he plays the *rôle* of Mentor to Vera, and bids her "keep herself unspotted from the world," this idol of fashion and women indulges in intrigues and dissipations, quite in the style approved by the world in which he moves.

We read of "an imperious and proud duchess, who the lamps in the Avenue Marigny had shone on, as she stole on foot, muffled and veiled, to hide her burning face on his breast," &c., &c.

Moreover, after Vera's virtual separation from

Zouroff, and her banishment to Poland, Corrèze seeks her in her retreat, passionately pleads his love, and endeavours to induce her to renounce her fidelity to her husband. Vera is inflexible, but sorely tempted by the man who had professed himself a sort of guardian angel.

This ghastly story concludes with Vera's divorce from Prince Zouroff, her marriage with Corrèze, and consequent banishment from society. She was innocent, but the victim of her enemies' machinations. Lady Dolly's friends exclaim, "It is very dreadful for her not to be able to know her own daughter! But how *can* she know her, you know?—divorced—and living out of the world with Corrèze."

We pass over Mrs. Forrester's flimsy work, which scarcely merits analysis. The absence of any marked talent in her sketches of society scandals and intrigues, by rendering her books wearisome, may, perhaps, lessen their evil influence.

We must notice very briefly the characteristics of Miss Rhoda Broughton's earlier and widely read novels, which treat almost exclusively of the passion of love.

An absence of self-control in every emergency is the prominent feature in this writer's heroines. They are essentially creatures of impulse, yielding to the manifestation of their emotions without regard to consequences. The authoress allows her facile pen to describe

scenes of passion and temptation in which these moral defects are conspicuous and work disastrous results.

It may be said of some of her heroines, that they are the *tempters* rather than the *tempted.* We refer our readers to the closing scene in "Cometh up as a Flower" in illustration. The situation is tragic and excites our pity, but the woman's position is a false one. The very human intensity of the passion of love, with all its pathos, is so powerfully portrayed in Miss Broughton's tales, that our hearts are drawn in warm sympathy towards the sufferers, even while we recognise their moral weakness.

Were the novelist to abstain from the portrayal of passion and worldliness and vice, his

characters would be untrue to human nature, and consequently devoid of interest.

We do not find fault with Miss Broughton for the wrong-doings of her heroines,—it is her mode of dealing with them against which we protest. Apparently, she is not only unconscious of the low moral standard exhibited by her characters, but is so attracted and fascinated by their fitful conduct that she blinks at the misery which results from it.

The line is *not* clearly marked between right and wrong. On the contrary, unprincipled conduct is often surrounded by a halo of sentimentalism which misdirects the sympathy, if not the admiration of the reader.

The fascination which these novels possess,

renders them insidiously harmful, especially to the young and imaginative. They are calculated to foster an indulgence in sentiment, which is apt not only to harden the heart, but to distort the moral perception, and so to unfit for the practical duties and sober realities of life.

"Red as a Rose is She" may be taken as a fair example of the ethical quality of Miss Broughton's novels. The absence of moral courage and self-control is prominent in Esther Craven's character.

The different manner in which subjects of what may be called ethical taste are now treated from what they were twenty-five years since, and the toleration, not untinged with

sympathy, accorded to moral weakness, is eminently conspicuous not only in the class of novels to which Miss Broughton's belong, which includes a large proportion of our modern works of fiction, but also on the English Stage in the present day; and though the Drama forms no part of the subject under our notice, we shall be pardoned, perhaps, for a slight digression, as illustrating our contention that a change, and not a healthful change, has taken place of late in the mode of looking at certain subjects.

We need do no more than point to the significant fact that "La Dame aux Camelias," which for a quarter of a century was prohibited in England, was lately licensed (in a modified

form) and attracted crowds. The unclean sentimentality of that drama drew tears from young girls, and the heroine's woes were discussed in drawing-rooms.

The most popular play on the London boards for many months, "Impulse," is one, the entire tone and temper of which would not have been tolerated formerly. The inexcusable weakness of the officer's wife, who, because her husband is absent on duty for a year and a half, consents to run away with a man she cares nothing for, is excused by the good angel of the plot (personified by that enchanting actress, Mrs. Kendal), who urges the perilous plea that duty is often a wife's rival, and that if that rival claims a husband

for two or three years, he must not feel surprised if he discovers that his wife has found some one else to console her.

Now had this speech been put into the mouth of a hard-headed man of the world it would have demanded no comment. What is astounding, is to find the good, high-minded Mrs. Beresford giving utterance to so degraded a view of wifehood. What! Is our standard of virtue fallen so far below that of the Greeks and Romans, that while the beautiful myth of a Penelope, the beautiful truth of a Volumnia, brighten the history of Paganism, we, at the end of the nineteenth century, must find palliation for the conduct of such a miserable creature as Mrs. Macdonald, who has not even

a strong passion to plead as an excuse for her idiotic conduct?

The old Dramatists would have given us a far more "improper" play than this; they would have delineated illicit love, and its attendant retribution in strong language that would shock our squeamish ears; but the *tone* of the whole, and its unmistakable definition between right and wrong, would have been far more wholesome than this representation of vice and weakness in a moral fog where no beacon of rectitude exists!

May not these portraitures of passion and impulse be an *effect*, as much as a cause, of greatly relaxed decorum in society (as to explicit betrayal of feelings, not as to their

intensity, or amount of indulgence, which we do not suppose varies much)? Apart from the constant interaction of cause and effect in the matter of feeling and expression of feeling, the question in our thought would state itself thus:—Social manners having so much loosened their dress, is it possible for novels to be true to nature without these graphic portraits of wrong or dangerous feelings? In fact, is not the religious and moral standard of our day chargeable with the risks of such plays as "Impulse,"—such stimulants to unrestrained surrender to passion, after a little interesting combat, as we find, for instance, in Mr. Mallock's "Romance of the Nineteenth Century," or Miss Braddon's "Asphodel"?

But we forbear the difficult discussion. All we can decidedly maintain is, that if vice and immorality must form part of the theme of our Society Novels, they ought to be treated as Mr. Hamilton Aïdé treats them, and not be presented to the reader in the seductive guise by which Ouida and others of the same school embellish the vice that every instinct of true humanity (apart from its animal basis) reprobates as ruinous alike to society and the individual.

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